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Wednesday, July 9, 2008

## Leggett-council meeting focuses on future budgets

Live Nation music hall, paying for roads also discussed at breakfast

County News by Janel Davis | Staff Writer

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The county's projected budget deficit for fiscal 2010 has reached about \$250 million as the budget analysts continue to monitor the economy, County Executive Isiah Leggett told the County Council on Tuesday.

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Leggett (D) and the council discussed budget projections during a breakfast meeting at the council office building in Rockville.

The estimated deficit assumes an 8 percent growth in spending in the fiscal year that begins July 1, 2009. That's much higher than his budget next year will recommend, Leggett told the council members, and the deficit could be reduced by lowering spending.

In addition to the 2010 deficit, county leaders are working to find \$8 million in savings for this fiscal year, which began July 1.

The county just ended an early retirement incentive program, with 152 employees accepting the offer. The county had expected 100 workers to take the offer; the current estimate is that the county will meet its \$5 million savings target.

Leggett also urged the council to approve an ambulance transport fee, which would be levied to pay for fire and rescue service needs. The council did not include the fee in this year's budget, and used a mix of fees, savings and taxes to make up the \$7 million the fee would have generated through the end of 2008. If the council does not approve the fee, which would be paid by insurance companies, alternatives would have to be found, Leggett said.

"Without the fee, the improvements we'll see will come nowhere near what we need," he told the council. "The ambulance fee is the best of some difficult options we have."

Also worrisome are the state's budget problems: Tax revenues are lower and the O'Malley administration has to find \$50 million in budget cuts to replace revenue from the repealed computer sales tax.

Two weeks ago, Leggett met with Gov. Martin O'Malley (D), who said he would try not to find the savings by taking state aid away from the counties.

Roads and rock 'n' roll

Traffic congestion, road maintenance and infrastructure needs dominated the second half of Tuesday's breakfast meeting.

Leggett plans to release revenue bonds later this summer as part of a council initiative passed two years ago to forward fund state transportation projects within the county to jumpstart construction.

Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park co-sponsored the plan that would use liquor sales profits for the funding.

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Leggett has been reluctant to release the bonds, preferring a boost in the state gasoline tax to pay for state projects.

“The county has to be careful about moving forward on its own initiative ... and if we do it, we have to do it selectively,” he warned.

County transportation officials are working on a similar revenue project, but with the money going to pay for county projects.

Leggett also clarified his position on zoning changes proposed for a new Silver Spring music hall, operated by concert promoter Live Nation, in the old J.C. Penney building.

The changes would give the Lee Development Group, which is donating the land for the music hall, up to 15 years to build on adjacent land. Some council and community members have questioned the change because it would alter the planning process by superseding the council, which oversees the Planning Board.

“This is a public-private partnership,” Leggett said. “We pushed this in a way to which we thought would be a good return for the county ... Without this, we could have a nice process to follow in the future, but nothing would be done [in that area of Silver Spring].”

A public hearing is set for July 29.

Coming next

Leggett and County Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown will host a live television call-in show at 7:30 p.m. today. Call in at 240-777-6540.

The council discusses the county’s response to last month’s water main break in Derwood at 9:30 a.m. July 15.

